

B- Ok. So my name is Benjamin Cornwall, B-E-N-J-A-M-I-N C-O-R-N-W-A-L-L, we're here on November 16th in South Portland. And if you could just say and spell your name for us?

R- My name is Richard Elias, R-I-C-H-A-R-D E-L-I-A-S.

B- And, just so you know, if you don't want to answer any of the question that I have for you, that's your right, you don't have to answer anything you don't want to. So, just to start off, if you wouldn't mind telling us a little bit about your experience growing up as a child?

R- Well it wasn't the greatest of experiences. When my father was bipolar and out of control a lot of the time, and he was around before they had medication for it. And the only treatment they had for it was electric shock treatments, and he had a lot of those. And my mother married him when he was OK, she didn't realize that he was sick. And it was pretty interesting. My father certainly didn't understand about me being gay even though it wasn't said, I didn't understand it either. But when I was little, my father and I weren't very close because he was.. he was a Middle Eastern, sports loving guy and I wasn't [laughs]. I liked everything my sister liked and so, we didn't get along very well. But then I found, through a friend of mine, I found a dance class and I joined and that really.. over the period of the next 5 or 6 years really gave me a sense of self-esteem and that made my growing up, really. And I had a wonderful mother and grandmother that took care of me and my sister and my brother. And other than my father having periodic manic and depressive episodes, I guess it was a fairly normal life.

B- And you said you didn't really understand about being gay until later on? Can you tell me a little bit about when you kind of realized that you were gay and what that process was like for you?

R- Well I was never interested in things that guys liked. So I kind of knew from the beginning that I was different, but I thought, like a lot of people thought, that it was a phase that I would grow out of, you know? So I had a lot of girlfriends, and girlfriends in my dance group and things like that and tried to play the game. I was even engaged twice. Then my best friend from 1st grade and I both had this

revelation when we were 18 that we were both gay. And we told each other and I was very grateful to have an ally and I knew I wasn't alone in the world. And from then on, it was kind of interesting, he moved to Portland from Bangor and I visited him in Portland and stayed a while. And I met somebody down here that kind of spurred me on to move down here. That situation didn't work out. I lived with this person for a few months and I think I was a little bit too needy at the time. He was kind of a free spirit and little younger than me, he was 19. And so it didn't work out and I was devastated. I kept moving on and.. I'm getting on to my adult life too soon aren't I?

B- Oh no, not at all.

R- And when I first came to Portland the only relations that you could really have to gay life were gay bars. And there was a bar called Roland's, and my friend Steve and I used to hang out there. And I can remember the first time I went in there, I was so scared my knees were actually shaking. And this is the only time in my life my knees actually shook [laughs]. I was just so nervous, I didn't know what to expect. We kept going back there and hanging out and I got to know people and I was a little more comfortable, and that was my introduction to gay life. So I was very lucky to have my friend Steve as an ally. We're best friends to this day, from 1st grade until now.

B- That's great.

R- So in the next twenty years, I guess, I had a series of short relationships with guys that never seemed to work out for one reason or another and I ultimately went to hairdressing school and became a hairdresser. I was fairly successful, and that gave me another increased self-esteem. And I've been doing hair for about 40 years, and it has been great. I've never really had any issues around being gay as far as other people go. I don't know if it's because of what I do, but I also feel like I have a pretty confident attitude and I'm proud of who I am and I've never tried to hide it. And I think that's really the reason.. I think people tend to pick on people that are not so confident. And so my life being gay hasn't been bad at all. It took me a long time to meet my husband Jeff. And that's worked out fairly well. Its been ups and downs and things like that. During my life being gay, I did everything everybody else did. I did drugs and the whole bit and that never

seemed to work out. But through it all I was really successful in my business. I've had three different hair salons and I'm kind of getting ready to retire at this point. And.. this has been kind of scattered, I know.

B- Oh no, it's not a problem. And just going back to kind of the coming out process, how did your family take it, or your close friends? You said that no one really reacted negatively towards it?

R- Well initially it wasn't quite that way. When I met this person and, I think like a lot of people, when you meet someone and you're really delirious and everything you want to tell people. And that's what I did, I was really so proud of the situation it gave me the courage to tell my mother and my sister. And my mother was a little devastated at the time. She didn't really realize it, although she told me later that she always knew I was different. And she probably knew that I was gay but didn't want to admit it. My sister was a little more evolved than my mother and she talked to her and said, you know, he's your son and you should love him unconditionally, anybody he decides to have in his life, we should be accepting. And from that point on, I brought people home, and they were part of my family and they were treated really well. My father was at that point kind of, in the background and not saying much. He was kind of.. a little bit of dementia, I guess. And so he was pretty quiet about the whole thing for a while. I never told him. He never knew from me. My grandmother was the closest person to me and I never told her. I know she knew, but it was like an unspoken thing between she and I. It was good, my family was wonderful to everybody I ever had in my life. And I've always been grateful for that, and they still are. We're part of my family, we're part of his family and it's just the way it should be. I'm really lucky, especially in this generation. It's tough. For a lot of people, a lot of people didn't have the support of anybody in their family. And it makes it hard when you have to choose between your lifestyle and your family. But I was lucky enough to never have to do that. And when Jeff [his partner] and I moved here I was a little bit concerned, because all of our neighbors around were.. for a lack of a better term, "redneck", you know they were guys who retired from the service and stay at home moms, those kinds of families. I was a little concerned about how they would accept us. We've been here a couple of years and all the people around us, they're all our best friends. We have dinners and things like that, and invite the whole neighborhood and they all love us. They all think we're the best thing that's ever happened to the neighborhood. I think that just being an example of just two people trying to make it and trying to make it in the world like everyone else, and have a house and family, I think that made other people realize

we're just like them. And so, I'm pretty proud about the fact that we turned a few people around. One family at a time. I think that's true for a lot of my clients at work too because I've been so open about it. I think it has opened their minds a little bit more about alternate lifestyles.

B- You mentioned, that when you were younger, dancing had been an outlet for you. Would you like to talk a little bit more about what that meant for you?

R- It meant that I really had something of my own that I was really good at. I wasn't too crazy about school, I never really fit in at school it was mostly a sports oriented thing and I never really got into school. And I was bullied somewhat growing up in school and around school. Thank God I found dancing because that was my self-esteem builder and gave me the courage to accept myself and realize that, now I was going on the right path for me. It was 12 or 13 years of the dancing thing. In retrospect if I could change some things I might've pursued that. Or music, I've always played the piano and I've always painted and done a lot of artwork. I don't know. I could've done a lot more than I have, but I haven't. But I'm alright [laughs].

B- What has the local gay community around here been like for you? You said that everyone's been very accepting?

R- Yeah, they have. In this neighborhood there's not much of a gay community, even though it's called Fairy Village. We found out quite quickly we weren't the only fairies in Fairy Village. [laughs] I think, like a lot of people when they settle down and get married, life's a little more quiet. Social life isn't, you know like not going out like you used to. I think, also because of the AIDS epidemic and just the general nature of things and probably computer technology, I don't think people go dancing and associate out as much as they used to. So that's kind of.. I don't go out much, we don't go out much. We usually go to dinner parties at other peoples houses that I've known for a long time. A social scene like that, that's really the biggest thing now.

B- Did the AIDS epidemic affect your social group a lot?

R- Yeah, I lost a lot of friends. It was pretty devastating. I volunteered at Peabody House for a long time which was a home for people with AIDS that weren't accepted by their own families or that didn't have the means to live any other way. And I made food for them all the time, I really enjoyed that. I did that for a couple of years. And Frannie Peabody was a good friend of mine. I think my life's been making food for people. She was 95 years old and lived in her mansion and was eating TV dinners and Swanson pot pies. So I took it upon myself to start making food her and bring it over, and she was really appreciative. We became really good friends. I guess I wasn't that much a part of the AIDS community, I was one of the fortunate ones I guess. For one thing, I was never very promiscuous, not that you have to be to contract AIDS but, I always seemed to be in a relationship one way or another and not really out there like a lot of other guys were. And so I'm really fortunate for that, it wasn't by design that's just the way it was. I had a couple of people in my life that were really interesting. One of them really turned on me and he tried to actually set me up on a weekend date with a guy that he knew had full blown AIDS. And he was trying to lose me I guess. That was about one of the most devastating things that ever happened. But it didn't happen, and he ended up dying. A lot of friends that I had, a good friend in New York was one of the longest AIDS survivors in the country. Oddly enough, after about ten years of having full blown AIDS, he fell backwards down a set of stairs, and that's how he died. Had nothing to do with AIDS, so life's ironic sometimes. And I had friends in New York that I used to hang out with and they were friends with my partner at the time. And we kind of got in trouble with them because they were big time cocaine dealers and that's when I kind of got into that. I never did that at work, I just did it when I went out dancing and things like that. It certainly affected my life. Drugs I guess were a big part of my life at that point. All of a sudden one day, this guy in New York disappeared and nobody knew where he went, and he had a breathing problem and couldn't be off his oxygen for long. He was my partner's uncle and we were all good friends at the time, it was all over the papers in New York and everything and they were doing this full blown investigation trying to find him. So my partner Tom and I went to New York and tried to help out with the investigation. We found at the last thing we were there, after about a week, that he had been killed by his roommate and a trick that they had picked up who was Puerto Rican. And I don't think he knew they were gay and they were trying to.. they made amateur movies and they tried to seduce him and get him high on things, and he flew off the handle and they killed him. We found out that he was cut up in trash bags underneath the bed that we were sleeping in, in his own apartment. And that's how they found him because there was an acrid smell in the apartment, and we told the police

and the police came and looked around and found him. After a three week investigation, so that was interesting.

B- Man.

R- I guess being gay has brought me to some interesting places, yeah. I spent time in San Francisco in the Castro District, I really enjoyed that it was fun. And the gay scene in New York, in the clubs. So it's gotten me.. England actually, London.. it's gotten me a lot of different places [laughs].

B- Well, having traveled so much, how would you say that Portland's gay community compares? Or, how your experience as a gay man in Portland compares to having lived in, or spent time in other cities?

R- I think there were people, especially in San Francisco obviously were more open and flamboyant, just flaunting, you know they have festivals in the street and things like that and that's just conducive to a larger city. And I think Portland is proportionate to what Maine is. Not so flamboyant, probably a little more so now, but certainly not when I was part of the gay community in Portland. The most flamboyant you got was at gay clubs. I think the gay scene in larger cities, people were a lot more connected because I think the city is a lonely place, and they tended to gravitate toward each other and help each other. In Portland, I think even with the gay community, has been more family oriented. For the most part. There are a lot of people that I know who haven't had the support of their families but, for the most part, I think Maine is pretty family oriented as opposed to the other places I've been. A lot of people were estranged from their families.

B- And how would you say your experience has changed over the years, as a gay man, do you feel that you have to restrain yourself in a small place like Portland?

R- No I've never felt that way. I've always been okay with being gay for some reason. When I moved here, in a sense, it was because of that. That brought about some freedom, and I was comparatively flamboyant. I wasn't trying to prove a point, I was just happy to be in a place where I could be myself, you know? I've always been

okay with it. I've had a lot of great gay friends and I've managed to stay friends with a lot of the people I've had relationships with. it has been good, it's been mostly good. I haven't had any bad situation since I've grown up, since I've come out, really. Nothing but good things happen except for the occasional thing like that in New York, with the guy trying to kill me by giving me aids. Other than that, [laughs] life's been pretty normal. And now I'm close to my family and close to my nieces and nephews, and they all think I'm pretty cool. Because I've lost my whole family from my generation up, I'm kind of the patriarch of my family. I have Christmas here for my family and there's about 10 or 12 of them and they all come down from different areas in Maine. I have a big Christmas party. I love doing that. People have told me I'm the gatherer, I'm the one that gets people together. And that's certainly true in my family. I think a lot of my family would never see each other if it weren't for me getting them all together. And I'm pretty proud of that, really. I'm proud of the fact that they all think the world of me and, you know apparently I handled something right [laughs]. Even Jeff's family considers me a son, I call them mom and dad since I don't have any anymore, I'm an orphan. But yeah, I've been really lucky.

B- And how about your experience with the gay bars in Maine?

R- I never really fit in with the gay bars in Maine. The only reason I ever really went out was to dance. I never was into.. just going out to have anonymous sex just wasn't me. When I went out when I was doing cocaine it was a little bit different. I was a little more assertive. I was never really comfortable in gay bars, I just never really felt like I fit in. Except for dancing. Unless I was doing something to alter my personality. But I'll say one thing, I'll never regret doing the cocaine that I did quite a bit of. Because, I did things on cocaine that I wouldn't dare to do otherwise, and also, after doing all that and realizing that.. I realized that I could be that way without doing cocaine. So it really changed my personality, it made me more outgoing. I realized that all the things I did on cocaine were in me anyway, so I didn't need that as a crutch anymore, so I stopped. But I still kept the best of it, you know? I know that's an alternate way of looking at drugs, but sometime that's peoples experience. If they're lucky enough to have control over it to stop then I think you can turn anything into a good thing.

B- You mentioned spending time at Roland's, I heard there had been some harrowing experiences there?

R- Oh yeah, I was there when two lesbians had a duel on the street and one of them just got shot and killed. I was also there when there was a drive-by and somebody shot bullets through the window. Thank God nobody was hurt but. There was a lot of things like that that happened around Portland at that time. But Roland's was fun, I always had a great time at Roland's. My friend Steve and I used to hang out there on Wednesday nights because they had 25 cent drafts and we had no money. So we'd all hit up guys at the bar and they'd buy us drinks [laughs], that was interesting. I never really had any money until I became a hairdresser, so I.. I had a lot of interesting experiences around that, but I always liked going out. The Phoenix was the best experience and The Phoenix was owned by Roland's, the same one that had Roland's. It was about a block and a half away from Roland's, so everybody that was gay that I knew in Portland made the run back and forth from Roland's to The Phoenix all night long, you know? [laughs] Every Saturday night it was like this little parade of people going back and forth. I was there on a Sunday night and went home, next morning I heard that The Phoenix had burned down, it burned after I left. It was arson. And it was a beautiful church edifice, and it was a wonderful club, and it was a great loss. Roland's was too in a way, because that was the only for gay men around, for years and years, and then that burned down. That was arson. Then there were other gay bars around town, and the one that's been there the longest is Blackstones. I was there the first day it opened, and we still go there occasionally. But there really hasn't been any.. besides The Underground, dancing isn't really big anymore really. I think people meet people online more than going out.

B- Is that the case with you as well these days? You and Jeff?

R- Yeah, but I think it's just a part of getting older. Not going out as much. Like I said, it's more of a house scene, you know, going to people's houses. It's more of a comfort thing. You know, you're not really looking to pick up anybody [laughs]. I never was anyway but. Yeah it's just a quieter life, and that's ok. Roland's was quite the thing though. I was there every night of the week for a long time. They had a small dance floor there, and I was the dancing queen [laughs]. I also met some interesting people at The Phoenix that I hung around with and befriended, and they didn't really end up being friends. I think most of the people that I've met in bars haven't really ended up being the best quality friends. The people that I'm really close to, I met in different ways, but it was a lot of fun at the time.



And it was the only thing at the time, really. To socialize that way. I feel like I've been kind of scattered.. not really having any cohesiveness to my life but [laughs].

B- Is there anything else that you'd like to talk about, about your experience? About the local community or your experience growing up as a gay man?

R- Well, it was the women in my life growing up that I was close to. I wasn't close to my father or my brother. They both had Middle Eastern personalities towards women and gay men. It made me realize that I think it's part of a genetic imprint. Because my father was that way, my brother was that way, and they grew up here, were born here, and my grandfather died when my father was really young. So all I can think of is that it was part of a genetic imprint. Because they were the same as the people in Saudi Arabia and those places and treated women like trash. I was the protector of the women in my family. I was always the one that.. I was the protector. I fought for them, and if he tried anything I would put him in his place, my father. And my brother. I was the protector of my mother and my grandmother, so they weren't abused by my father. And that was an interesting place to be for a kid. I was that way right up until they died. It culminated with my mother, before she dies, saying that she didn't understand how people survived without gay sons [laughs]. So I was pretty happy that she said that. It was kind of tongue in cheek, but it was real, she meant it. When she was on her deathbed she thanked me for being the person that I was and for all I'd done for her. She said that she wouldn't have wished anything different for me and that she's happy for everything I'd done and the way I was. That felt really nice. So growing up was kind of a dichotomy. It was good and bad. One side was good, one side was bad. But there was enough good influence on one side that I came out with a sense of confidence and I realized early on what was going on in the dynamic in the family and that made me able to handle it. And handle myself better too because of it. And accept the way I was easier, because my father was so troubled, and things like that, I mean the fact that I was gay was the least of anybody's problems in the family, and mine, really. I always accepted myself. So, sometimes family adversity makes you stronger, or adversity does make you stronger if you survive it all. So, I'm OK, I'm still here. 62 and I survived. It's been interesting.

B- Well unless there's anything you'd like to say, then I suppose we can finish now or?

R- I think I probably touched on just about everything that's important to me. Ya, I'm happy being gay. It's never been a problem for me, so I'm grateful for that.

B- Well thank you so much for your time and telling us your story.

R- You're welcome. It's been nice. It's been interesting talking about it.

